

How its inhabitants influenced the growth of a suburb

The History of Putney Progress Association

by Julie Dawson

The following article is re-produced with the kind permission of Julie Dawson, President of the Ryde District Historical Society – from The Ryde Recorder, March 1997, journal and newsletter of the Ryde District Historical Society Inc, This is a truly amazing story of the history of Putney and the incredible efforts of many civic minded people over nearly 100 years.



The suburb of Putney, like most areas of the municipality of Ryde, grew rather slowly. It appears that, apart from some properties, the recipients of early grants in the area were rarely successful in producing commercial crops. In the first 40 years of European settlement, much of Putney was owned by the Squire family who made their living producing and selling beer. Very little of the land appears to have been utilised for commercial farming, perhaps due mainly to the adverse terrain. Settlement began to take place in the western portion of Putney from very early in Ryde's history due to the proximity to Ryde wharf and the main road to the village at Top Ryde, but photographs of the area around "Cleves" near Kissing Point and of the Putney peninsular area taken in the 1890s show undisturbed forest land surrounding isolated cottages.

Though planning for subdivision of the district into small urban lots began as early as the 1850s, much of the eastern portion of Putney remained untouched until early this century. In the 1880s a man named Phillip Billingsley Walker acquired much of the peninsular area and, to "sweeten the pot" to buyers of his subdivision, built a wharf and handed it over to Ryde Council.

From that time people began to buy the small blocks as home sites and the Putney area began to change from a relatively isolated and untouched area to the suburbia we know today. The 1912 "Sands' Directory" lists 80 households in the Putney area. There were 3 houses in Delange Road including "Cleves"; 4 in Frances Road; 2 in Mitchell Street; 21 in Morrison Road between Church Street and Morrison's (sic) Bay; 6 in Pellisier Road (including "Dudhope", the mansion in what is now Putney Park); 6 in Phillip Road; 13 in Princes Street; 5 in Regent Street; 1 in Riverside Avenue; 4 in Small Street; 3 in Stanley Street; 1 in Walker Street and 11 in Waterview Street.

Putney was obviously growing rapidly yet there was no water supply, no formed roads, no postal facilities or schools. Gas and electricity had not found its way into its extremities, either. This lack of what was already accepted by other parts of the municipality as basic to life in the suburbs must have galled the locals. Individual lobbying had proved unsuccessful, perhaps lobbying as a group might help. Thus the Putney Progress Association was formed.

Oral sources report that a well was used by the local housewives to draw water for their washing and it became a meeting place for the isolated families. These gatherings led to the realisation that a formal community association would benefit the community. Thus, the first meeting of the Putney Progress Association took place, it is reported, in 1912. According to documents in its records, the daughter of Mr Richard Skelton states that he was *"the instigator and first president of the Association and that its first meeting was held under a mulberry tree which stood near a stone house ... on the site of what is now No 18 Stanley Street, Putney."*

The Association's earliest surviving letters are dated 1915 and are all written by the *"Hon Sec"* A Wells of *"Mitchell Street, Putney, Parramatta River"*. They make interesting reading in these days of bitumen roads, electricity, sewerage and even water from taps in the house. Also of interest is their expectations of prompt service by Ryde Council and other bodies. If the Association had not received a reply from Council within 2 weeks of their letter, another letter was sent complaining about Council's tardiness! The letters begin on 20.3.1915 with one addressed to Alderman McLeod to *"open up Walker Street and (make) Mitchell St"*.

In April they were lobbying Council to provide street lighting. Thirteen days later they had still not received a reply from Council and had written again urging the Council Clerk to receive a deputation from the Association to discuss the matter, The *"Post-Master, General"* was being lobbied to provide *"postal and telephone conveniences in the district of Putney"* as there were now approximately 250 people living there and *"not a solitary post or telephone box in the whole area. A telephone on the corner of Mitchell and Phillip Road would be the most convenient position."* In August, the post box had been placed in situ but the telephone box had not. Further letters were sent urging the provision of such a facility as there had been *"a lot of sickness of late" over a mile away.* "... and ... *"the nearest Doctor is over a mile away"*.

On 13.5.1915 a letter was sent to the Honorable A Griffiths, Minister for Public Instruction appealing for the Department to give consideration to providing a school in the district. The letter goes on to say that "*In this district famous for the shocking state of its roads, the nearest school is fully two miles away. Consequently during the wet months of the year, parents faced with this difficulty, they must either deprive their children of the inestimable advantages of education or expose them to the rigours (sic) of a two mile tramp through mud and rain.*" They estimated that there were 90 school age children in the district.

In June, two letters were sent to the Inspector of Nuisances complaining of a large water hole in Magnussen's estate on the corner of Mitchell Street and Francis Road measuring some "30' long and 7' deep". It was pointed out in the second letter that a case of typhoid had occurred in the past two weeks and previous to that, four cases of diphtheria in the district.

A letter was sent to the Town Clerk complaining of the two roomed house being built of second hand galvanised iron for the "*express purpose of letting*" and requesting information as to whether this conformed with Council regulations.

On 29.6.1915 a letter was sent to Sydney Ferries Ltd referring to the approximately 30 male inhabitants of the district who were employed at Mortlake Gas Works, As most started their shift at 7.30am, it would be more convenient for these men if they were not forced to catch the 6.55am ferry, arriving at Mortlake at 6.57am which necessitated a half hour wait before they started work. It was suggested that perhaps the Company could divert the 7.15am Ryde ferry to Putney to convey the men across the river to Mortlake closer to their starting time.

In July a request was made to the Water and Sewerage Board to have the water main extended along Mitchell Street and Pellisier Road as there were 14 houses, in all, without water. In September a proposal had been received from the Water Board and was acceptable to "*those persons interested.*"

The AGL Co was lobbied in September, 1915 to install a "*Gas Lighting System*" with "*Automatic Meters*" to houses in the district as there appeared to be "*a growing need for an effective Lighting System in this district, which is progressing very rapidly*".

As the letters only go up to October, 1915 it is impossible to tell the outcome of some of the issues. Nevertheless, the letters give a wonderful picture of the problems faced by the early settlers of our suburbs and the positive way the community went about solving those problems.

Future research may tell us whether the people of Putney ever got their telephone on the corner of Mitchell and Phillip Road, or whether the gentleman building the galvanised iron shack was allowed to rent it out, or whether the workers at the Gas Works were able to sleep in half an hour longer. However, we know that, eventually the community got its gas lighting and its water mains. We know, too, that they got their school, but the Association's records show that even that was achieved with great difficulty and some chicanery.

Numerous representation had been made over many years to have a school built in the suburb. The Association had been warned that the Minister and the Education Department were reticent about building a school in Putney, and uncertain about the real number of children in the district.

However, as the Association's long time leader, Tom Hickey, wrote – by then they were seasoned campaigners and a day or two prior to a visit of inspection by the Minister for Education and his party, the "*local forces*" made a purchase

of large tins of lollies and biscuits. The few local children told all their school mates beyond Putney to attend a small picnic near the present site of the school. The minister finally arrived and during the courtesies and speeches noted his amazement at the apparent fecundity of the Putney families. The school opened in 1921.

There is a gap in the Association's records held in Ryde Council's Local History Collection from 1915 to 1945. However, it is known that the Association carried on lobbying until World War II when most community groups went into recess due to the war effort. On 9 October, 1945, 27 residents attended a meeting at Bywater's Hall, Delange Road, Putney to reconvene the Association. Mr Tom Hickey was elected President and Mr Reg Hales was made the Secretary/Treasurer with Messrs Gibson and Clarke as vice Presidents. A two shilling per annum subscription was levied to pay for hall rental and other expenses.

Putney was one of many Progress Associations existing during this period and in 1945 a "Ryde Federation of Progress Associations" was formed which included Denistone, Denistone East and West, Gladesville South, Eastwood, Eastwood Heights, Putney and Ryde Progress Associations. Fifty years later, only two local Progress Associations are active, Putney Progress Association and the Meadowbank-West Ryde Progress Association.

Following World War II, Putney like much of Sydney, grew rapidly. The Housing Commission built a large number of houses in the Delange Road, Chadwick Street, Waterview Street and Charles Street area and many other houses in the area were built by returned soldiers with loans from the War Service Homes scheme. In a letter dated 16.12.1952 the Secretary of the Association stated that *"In the last two years the population (of the district) had increased twohundred fold"*. With the new young families came young children and the Association began to lobby for the establishment of a Baby Health Centre and a Community Hall to be built in Parry Park.

To add to the need for a new hall, the old Bywater's Hall in Delange Road was to be demolished and not replaced. Fetes and various fund-raising activities were carried out with specific input by the Association's Women's Committee which had been formed in 1953. It met and held functions in the old *"Progress Hall"* in Frances Road which was then owned by the Church of England. Following the War there had been a great shortage of all types of building materials, so the State Government advised the Association that it would allow the Association to have enough materials to build a Baby Health Centre, but could not make materials available to construct a Community Hall.

As well, the government, aldermen and the banks all advised that the coming of TV would probably render local halls redundant. However, in 1951 the Association was advised by St Chads Church of England that they would be willing to sell their Hall in Frances Road and the Association's offer of £700 was duly accepted. The Hall needed repairs and a small committee consisting of Harry Anareski, Lionel Mitchell (then Secretary), Frank Wilson, Gus Dubos, Maurice Bevington and Tom Hickey set about renovating the hall and building new toilets.

Over the years the hall brought in some small measure of revenue but the advice of the bankers, etc had proved correct and the demand for local public halls diminished. Maintenance costs proved a problem and when an offer was made by a Mr and Mrs Walsh to establish a kindergarten in the hall with the option to later purchasing it, the Association saw the opportunity to turn the building into an amenity for local mothers and children. In 1966 the Walshes' offer to purchase the hall was accepted.

During this period the Association had been lobbying to have a Bowling and Community Club established on Council land. That specific project failed but the Association's activities led to a surge of interest among locals which resulted in the building of the Putney-Tennyson Community Bowling Club by voluntary labour on its present site. On completion, the downstairs area of the club was offered to the Association for their meetings in recognition of their efforts to achieve its establishment, and the Women's Committee used the area to cater for the elderly and isolated people of the district once a week.

Lobbying by the Association was usually carried out by letter and/or deputation. It was not restricted solely to the local Council but was also aimed at various Ministers of Departments, local politicians and anyone with the ability to apply pressure in the right places to achieve results. By far, the greatest majority of its letters were for problems such as lack of sewerage, poor road surfaces, bad drainage, better bus services, more ferries, more communication facilities, etc though occasionally they became involved in wider issues such as the health risks associated with wrapping food in newspaper and the refusal by bread carters to deliver bread to the front doors of houses in preference to leaving it in a bin left at the front gate with the money in it!

The establishment of new Council boundaries which would have put the Putney/Gladesville areas into Hunter's Hill Council district was also dealt with. A letter was sent to Ryde Council asking them not to approve of the changes as the people of Putney were quite happy to be part of the Ryde Council area and did not wish to change to Hunter's Hill Council.

The Sydney Water Hoard was a recipient of many letters, mainly in an effort to acquire sewerage for the district. The Board argued that the district was built on sandstone which made excavation both difficult and expensive. Being a low lying district, further expense would be needed to build the necessary pumping stations. For these reasons, Putney was well down the list of suburbs to be given sewerage. To take away the urgent need for sewerage services, a sewer dump was to be set up in the brick pits on the corner of Morrison and Tennyson Roads which would give the district a sewer disposal area lasting for many years. Undeterred by these plans, the Association, with the support of the Federation of Ryde Progress Associations, lobbied vigorously against the sewer dump and, at the same time gained the support of Ryde Council, Sir Kenneth Anderson, Sir John Cramer and many others. Plans by the Water Board for the sewer dump were overturned and Putney was finally sewered in the late 1960/early 1970s.

The Association's lobbying in the 1950s also helped obtain the land on which the Putney Boy Scouts Hall was built. As well, Council had made a decision to use the top ends of most of the bays in the district as rubbish dumps. A rubble wall was built on the perimeter of the mangroves in Morrison Bay and, for many years the area was used to dump rubbish, much of it coming from the huge wartime transport camp in North Ryde. The Association lobbied to have a more impervious and aesthetically pleasing wall built around the dump but the project was rejected by Council as being too expensive. The Association took up the challenge and found one of its members who was willing to carry out the project for approximately one quarter the estimated cost, using second hand stone. The project went ahead soon after.

An important part of the activities of Putney Progress Association has been fundraising. Their records are full of particulars of various fund raising functions such as dances, fairs, raffles, games nights, chocolate wheels at the local shopping centre on a Saturday morning, etc. Prizes for raffles were begged from businesses throughout Sydney. The winner of a threepenny raffle could go home with a large bag of flour and a sieve or a dripping container! Support was, and still is given to the Spastic Centre, the Royal Ryde Homes complex, Putney School and many other local groups including the Ryde District Historical Society. Over the years, many of its members have given their time to carry out volunteer works such as helping to refurbish their Hall, helping to build the Bowling Club, tree planting and many others.

During the 1950s, the Association joined with other local Progress Associations to lobby Council to build a swimming pool in the district. Progress was too slow for Putney, so its members held a number of working bees to clean up Putney Park and restore the old swimming baths. The baths functioned as the haven for hot children until well into the 1960s when they became dilapidated, polluted and were eventually filled in

Putney Progress Association still meets every three months. Though, in the past it has successfully fought to have the basic amenities of comfortable suburban living put on in the area and has achieved this, it has not given up fighting to keep Putney a pleasant place to live in for its inhabitants.

The above information has come from Putney Progress Association records held in the-Local History Collection at Ryde Library and Information Services. This included a brief summary of the history of the Association ,written many years ago by Mr Tom Hickey and some information on the Women's Committee by Mrs Peg Hickey. My special thanks goes to Mr Reg Vinden, a member of the Association for over 30 years for oral information on the Association.